Jane Cable

... By ...

GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON,

Author of "Beverly of Graustark," Etc.

(Continued.)

Elias Droom had not succeeded as a lawyer. He repelled people, growing more and more bitter against the world as his struggles became harder. What little money he had accumulated—heaven alone knew how he came by it—dwindled to nothing, and he was in actual squalor when later Bansemer found him in an attic in Baltimore. Even as he engaged the half starved wretch to become his confidential clerk the lawyer shuddered and almost repented of his action.

But Elias Droom was worth his weight in gold to James Bansemer from that day forth. His employer's sole aim in life was to get rich and thereby to achieve power. His ambition was laudable if one accepts the creed of morals, but his methods were not so praiseworthy. After a year or two of starvation struggles to get on with the legitimate he packed up his scruples and laid them away—temporarily, he said. He resorted to sharp practice, knavery and all the forms of legal blackmail. It was not long before his bank account began to swell. His business thrived. He was so clever that not one of his shady proceedings reacted. It is safe to venture that 99 per cent of the people who were bilked through his manipulations promised in the heat of virtuous wrath to expose him, but he had learned to smile in security. He knew that exposure for him meant humiliation for the instigator, and he continued to rest easy while he worked hard.

"You're getting rich at this sort of thing," observed Droom one day after the lawyer had closed a particularly nauseous deal to his own satisfaction, "but what are you going to do when the tide turns?"

Bansemer, irritated on perceiving that the other was engaged in his exasperating habit of rubbing his hands together, did not answer, but merely thundered out, "Will you stop that?"

There was a faint suggestion of the possibility of a transition of the hands to claws as Droom abruptly desisted, but smilingly went on:

"Some day the other shark will get the better of you, and you'll have nothing to fall back on. You've been building on mighty slim foundations. There isn't a sign of support if the worst comes to the worst," he chuckled.

"It's a large world, Droom," said his employer easily.

"And small also, according to another saying," supplemented Droom. "When a man's down, everybody kicks him. I'm afraid you could not survive the kicking."

Droom grinned so diabolically as again he resumed the rubbing of his hands that the other turned away, with an oath, and closed the door to the inside office. Bansemer was alone and where Droom's eyes could not see him, but something told him that the grin hung outside the door for many minutes, as if waiting for a chance to pop in and tantalize him.

Bansemer was a good looking man of the coarser mold—the kind of man that merits a second look in passing, and the second look is not always in his favor. He was thirty-five years of age, but looked older. His face was hard and deeply marked with the lines of intensity. The black eyes were fascinating in their brilliancy, but there was a cruel, savage light in their depths. The nose and mouth were clean cut and pitiless in their very symmetry. Shortly after leaving college to hang out his shingle he had married the daughter of a minister. For two years her sweet influence kept his efforts along the righteous path, but he writhed beneath the yoke of poverty. His pride suffered because he was unable to provide her with more of the luxuries of life. In his selfish way he loved her. Failure to advance made him surly and ill tempered, despite her amiable efforts to lighten the shadows around their little home. When the baby boy was born to them and she suffered more and more from the unkindness of privation James Bansemer, by nature an aggressor, threw off restraint and plunged into the traffic that soon made him infamously successful. She died, however, before the taint of his duplicity touched her, and he, even in his grief, felt thankful that she never was to know the truth.

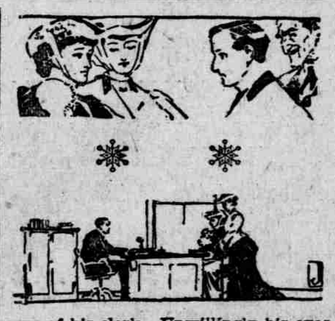
At this time Bansemer lived in comfort at one of the middle class boarding houses uptown, and the boy was just leaving the kindergarten for a private school. Bansemer's calloused heart had one tender chamber, and in it dwelt the little lad with the fair hair and gray eyes of the woman who had died.

Late one November afternoon just before Bansemer put on his light topcoat to leave the office for the day Droom tapped on the glass panel of the door to his private office. Usually the clerk communicated with him by signal, a floor button by which he could acquaint his master with much that he ought to know, and the visitor in the outer office would be none the wiser. The occasions were rare when he went so far as to tap on the door. Bansemer was puzzled and stealthily listened for sounds from the other side. Suddenly there came to his ears the voices of women, mingled with Droom's suppressed but always raucous tones.

Bansemer opened the door. Looking into the outer office, he saw Droom swaying before two women, rubbing his hands and smiling. One of the women carried a small babe in her arms. Neither she nor her companion seemed quite at ease in the presence of the lank guardian of the outer office.

CHAPTER IV.

"LADY to see you," announced Droom. The shrewd, fearless genius of the inner room glanced up quickly and met the prolonged, uncanny



gaze of his clerk. Unwillingly his eyes fell.

"Confound it, Lias! Will you ever quit looking at me like that? There's something positively creepy in that stare of yours!"

"Lady to see you," repeated the clerk, shifting about uneasily and then gliding away to take his customary look at the long row of books in the wall cases. He had performed this act a dozen times a day for more than five years. The habit had become so strong that chains could not have restrained him. It was what he considered a graceful way of dropping out of notice, at the same time giving the impression that he was constantly busy.

"Are you Mr. Bansemer?" asked the woman with the babe in her arms as he crossed into the outer office.

For a moment Bansemer purposely remained absorbed in the contemplation of his finger nails; then he shot a sudden, comprehensive glance which took in the young woman, her burden and all the supposed conditions. There was no doubt in his mind that here was another "paternity case," as he catalogued them in his big black book.

"I am," he replied shortly, for he usually made short, quick work of such cases. These was not much money in them at best. "Would you mind coming in tomorrow? I'm just leaving for the day."

"It will take but a few minutes, sir, and it would be very hard for me to get away again tomorrow," said the young woman nervously. "I'm a governess in a family way uptown, and my days are not very free."

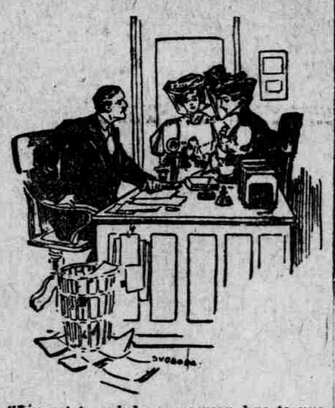
"Is this your baby?" asked Bansemer, more interested. The word governess appealed to him. It meant that she had to do with wealthy people at least.

"No—that is—well, not exactly," she replied confusedly. The lawyer looked at her so sharply that she flinched under his gaze. A kidnaper, thought he, with the quick cunning of one who deals in stratagems. Instinctively he looked about as if to make sure that there were no unnecessary witnesses to share the secret.

"Come into this room," said he suddenly. "Both of you. See that we are not disturbed," he added to Droom. "I think I can give you a few minutes, madam, and perhaps some very good advice. Be seated," he went on, closing the door after them. His eyes rested on Droom's face for an instant as the door closed, and he saw a particularly irritating grin struggling on his thin lips. "Now, what is it? Be as brief as possible, please. I'm in quite a hurry."

It occurred to him at this juncture that the young woman was not particularly distressed. Instead, her rather pretty face was full of eagerness, and there was a certain lightness in her manner that puzzled him for the moment. Her companion was the older of the two and quite as prepossessing. Both were neatly dressed, and both looked as though they were or had been breadwinners. If they had a secret it was now quite evident to this shrewd, quick thinker that it was not a dark one. In truth, he was beginning to feel that something mischievous lurked in the attitude of the two visitors.

"I want to ask how a person has to proceed to adopt a baby," was the



"I want to ask how a person has to proceed to adopt a baby."

blunt and surprising remark that came from the one who held the infant. Bansemer felt himself getting angry.

"Who wants to adopt it?" he asked shortly.

"I do, of course," she answered, so readily that the lawyer stared. He scanned her from head to foot critically; her face reddened perceptibly. It surprised him to find that she was more than merely good looking. She was positively attractive!

"Are you a married woman?" he demanded.

"Yes," she answered, with a furtive glance at her companion. "This is my sister," she added.

"I see. Where is your husband?"

"He is at home, or, rather, at his mother's home. We are living there now."

"I thought you said you were a governess?"

"That doesn't prevent me from having a home, does it?" she explained easily. "I'm not a nurse, you know."

"This isn't your child, then?" he asked impatiently.

"I don't know whose child it is." There was a new softness in her voice that made him look hard at her while she passed a hand tenderly over the sleeping babe. "She comes from a foundlings' home, sir."

"You cannot adopt a child unless supported by some authority," he said. "How does she happen to be in your possession, and what papers have you from the foundlings' home to show that the authorities are willing that you should have her? There is a lot of red tape about such matters, madam."

"I thought perhaps you could manage it for me, Mr. Bansemer," she said plaintively. "They say you never fail at anything you undertake." He was not sure there was a compliment in her remark, so he treated it with indifference.

"I'm afraid I can't help you." The tone was final.

"Can't you tell me how I'll have to proceed? I must adopt the child, sir, one way or another." Her manner was more subdued, and there was a touch of supplication in her voice.

"Oh, you go into the proper court and make application, that's all," he volunteered carelessly. "The judge will do the rest. Does your husband approve of the plans?"

"He doesn't know anything about it."

"What's that?"

"I can't tell him. It would spoil everything."

"My dear madam, I don't believe I understand you quite clearly. You want to adopt the child and keep the matter dark so far as your husband is concerned? May I inquire the reason?" Bansemer naturally was interested by this time.

"If you have time to listen, I'd like to tell you how it all comes about. It won't take long. I want some one to tell me just what to do, and I'll pay for the advice, if it isn't too expensive. I'm very poor, Mr. Bansemer. Perhaps you won't care to help me after you know that I can't afford to pay very much."

"We'll see about that later," he said brusquely. "Go ahead with the story."

The young woman hesitated, glanced nervously at her sister as if for support and finally faced the expectant lawyer with a flash of determination in her dark eyes. As she proceeded Bansemer silently and somewhat disdainfully made a study of the speaker. He concluded that she was scarcely of common origin and was the possessor of a superficial education that had been enlarged by conceitedness. Furthermore, she was a person of selfish instincts, but without the usual cruel impulses. There was little, if any, sign of true refinement in the features, and yet there was a strange strength of purpose that puzzled him. As her story progressed he solved the puzzle. She had the strength to carry out a purpose that might further her own personal interests, but not the will to endure sacrifice for the sake of another. Her sister was larger and possessed a reserve that might have been mistaken for deepness. He felt that she was hardly in sympathy with the motives of the younger, more volatile woman.

"My husband is a railroad engineer and is ten years older than I," the narrator said in the beginning. "I wasn't quite nineteen when we were married, two years ago. For some time we got along all right; then we began to quarrel. He commenced to"—

"Mr. Bansemer is in a hurry, Fan," broke in the older sister sharply, and then, repeating the lawyer's words, "Be as brief as possible."

There was a world of reproach in the look which greeted the speaker. Evidently it was a grievous disappointment not to be allowed to linger over the details.

"Well," she continued half pettishly, "it all ended by his leaving home, job and everything. I had told him that I was going to apply for a divorce. For three months I never heard from him."

"Did you apply for a divorce?" asked the lawyer, stifling a yawn.

"No, sir, I did not, although he did nothing toward my support." The woman could not resist a slightly coquettish attempt to enlist Bansemer's sympathy. "I obtained work at St. Luke's Hospital For Foundlings and after that as a governess. But once a week I went back to the asylum to see the little ones. One day they brought in a beautifully dressed baby—a girl. She was found on a doorstep, and in the basket was a note asking that she be well cared for. With it was a hundred dollar bill. The moment I saw the little thing I fell in love with her. I made application, and they gave me the child with the understanding that I was to adopt it. You see, I was lonely. I had been living alone for nine or ten months. The authorities knew nothing of my trouble with Mr. Cable—that's my husband, David Cable. The child was about a month old when I took her to his mother, whom I hadn't seen in months.

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